DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 414 141 RC 021 287

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TITLE If I Am an Artist, What's Wrong with My Picture? Rediscovering Your Creativity in a Grown-up World.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Deeply Rooted, Branching Out, 1972-1997. Annual AEE International Conference Proceedings; see RC 021 269.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Art Expression; Coping; Creative Activities; *Creativity; Enrichment Activities; Experiential Learning; *Life Satisfaction; *Play; *Quality of Life; Self Expression; *Sensory Experience; Well Being
IDENTIFIERS *Creative Play; Enjoyment; *Flow Characteristics

ABSTRACT

All persons are born and blessed with a creative nature, and are all artists of their own lives. By the time individuals reach adulthood, however, most of them have lost touch with their creativity, believing only "others" are "artists." Awareness of and regular use of the creative aspect of their being makes substantial contributions to establishing a healthy balance in their lives, learning more about themselves, providing options for action, and enriching the quality of their lives on a daily basis. "Flow" is a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it. Regular flow experiences improve subjective well-being; people report feeling happy and fulfilled, with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. The eight characteristics of enjoyment, which are characteristic of creative activities as well, are presented, as are as eight activities that remove blocks to creativity and allow people to once again experience the joy of creation. Creative play helps individuals meet the needs that they have ignored as adults, and offers opportunities to heal and live happier, healthier, and more productive lives. Contains eight references. (TD)

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If I Am An Artist, What's Wrong With My Picture? Rediscovering Your Creativity in a Grown-up World

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B. Baker

ABSTRACT

Born and blessed with a creative nature, we are, indeed, all artists of our own lives. By the time we reach adulthood, however, most of us have lost touch with our creativity, believing only "others" are "artists." Awareness of and regular use of the creative aspect of our being makes a substantial contribution to establishing a healthy balance in our lives, learning more about ourselves, providing options for action, and enriching the quality of our lives on a daily basis. Through exploration of experiential, interactive creative experiences with art, music, movement, and reflection, individuals can enrich and expand their human potential by reaffirming their innate creativity.

Blowing bubbles . . . finger painting . . . new crayons . . . the smell and feel of fresh clay squashed between your fingers . . . sandboxes . . . and dancing to the music you hear in your head — how long has it been since you have enjoyed such simple pleasures? Even if you can't remember the last time you engaged in these activities, or further, you think that these are "inappropriate" activities for an adult like yourself, please keep reading. In the next few pages you will discover that not only are these "appropriate" adult activities, but indeed, they are essential in renewing joy and passion for life.

RC 021287

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Take a trip down memory lane and try to remember what it was like to be engrossed in one of these activities as a child. The wonderful sense of absorption and delight in the simplest pleasures — the delightful trickle of sand through your fingertips, over and over again; forming brightly colored clay into crude animals and shapes only you could decipher; creating a world for yourself in which time had no meaning and life was simply to be enjoyed. Child's play? A waste of time? Non-productive?

Interestingly enough, research supports the contention that what feels good to us about these activities is actually good for us — as children and as adults. Far from being a waste of time, creative activities such as the ones mentioned above (and thousands of others), fulfill a very important need in our lives — even as adults. According to Andre (1991), people who are in touch with their own creativity become increasingly centered, whole, and purposeful — able to discover meaning for their lives and pursue their goals with more focus. Through engaging in creative activities, we can be happier, healthier, and yes, more productive in our grown-up worlds.

Tony Buzan (1997), a world leader in improving learning techniques and creativity, cites the results of a study of 1,600 children who were given eight tests of divergent thinking. Of the children from ages 3 to 5, 98% scored in the creative genius category; 5 years later, 32%; 5 years later, 10%. Of more than 200,000 adults over 25 years old, only 2% scored in the creative genius category. In an era when we need creative, divergent thinking skills more than ever before, are we somehow *extinguishing* these important innate creative abilities as children grow into adults?

Talk to almost any adult engaged in the daily business of making a living and one repetitive refrain emerges: "I feel that I am so busy making a living that I have given up having a *life*." Various sources note that stress-related ill-

ness is responsible for anywhere from 60% to 80% of visits to primary care physicians. Adults, adolescents, and even children turn to substance use and addictive entertainment to try to fill the gaping hole that is left in the psyche when our creative nature is stifled.

Ornstein and Sobel (1989) in their book, *Healthy Pleasures*, describe the characteristics of vital, healthy, robust individuals. One of the most important characteristics of these individuals is that they are keenly aware of their senses and relish the opportunity to indulge in various sensory pleasures of every kind. Many of our most important sources of pleasure come from indulging our desire for sensual pleasures — taste, touch, smell, sight, sound. As the authors state, "Many of us are not getting our minimum daily requirement of sensual pleasures." Sensory stimulation activities activate the pleasure centers in the brain, evoking a sense of well-being and positive mood. Regular involvement in creative activities allows sensory stimulation to become a part of our daily lives — instead of something that we seek to mimic through dangerous alternatives. Creative activities can provide a refreshing respite from the multiple tasks required by our modern society — tasks which all too often are toxic to many dimensions of our health.

Unfortunately, because of the pervasive influence of our Western culture, we seem to have developed a phobia about having fun — as if something that stimulates our senses, feels good, and is enjoyable is taboo. Therefore, as we move from childhood to adulthood, we are urged to abandon sensual pleasures and settle down to "business." Whether it is the six-year-old schoolboy, the adolescent schoolgirl, or the young adult business person, it becomes all too clear that our culture expects "productivity." Yet perhaps in squelching our creativity, we are also sabotaging our self-actualization — and our optimal productivity as well.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990), in his classic book *Flow*, summarizes decades of research on joy and creativity to create general principles for transforming dull, boring lives into lives of meaning, enjoyment, and purpose. Csikszentmihalyi describes "flow" as "a state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it." Many times this sense of "flow" is described by individuals who are intensely involved in work that they find compelling and intrinsically rewarding or play that is active and engrossing. While some individuals are fortunate enough to experience flow activities regularly in their work because they truly love what they do, most individuals need supplemental experiences to allow themselves to get in touch with the creative aspect of themselves that allows them to become totally absorbed in what they are doing.

According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990), there are eight characteristics of enjoyment. While they may not all be present in every activity, they are heavily represented in individuals' descriptions of enjoyable activities — and are characteristic of creative activities as well: 1) confrontation of tasks which one has a chance of completing; 2) the ability to concentrate fully on the task at hand; 3) clear goals; 4) immediate feedback; 5) a deep but effortless involvement that removes from awareness the worries and frustrations of everyday life; 6) a sense of exercising control over one's actions; 7) a diminished concern for the self, yet paradoxically the sense of self emerges stronger after the flow experience is over; and 8) the sense of the duration of time being altered.

When people have regular flow experiences in their lives, it improves subjective well-being (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). People report feeling happy and fulfilled, with a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. While they may be extremely busy and life may be full of challenges, they do not report feeling over-

whelmed, depressed, or out of control. What happens when people aren't able to engage in flow activities? They are then often drawn to activities that are wasteful or destructive, as they seek other means of achieving even brief moments of enjoyment. They attempt to recapture some of the qualities of optimal experience by artificial means — often relying on an addiction to a substance or something, or someone, outside oneself for feeling good. Passive voyeurism is substituted for active involvement, even though the rewards are not nearly as enjoyable. Such artificial means of deriving enjoyment are not simply inadequate, they can be dangerous, both to individuals and to society at large. When people are regularly involved in flow activities, there is little need for professional performers to take people's minds off the stress or monotony of the activities that they do day in and day out. They are themselves engaged in creative activities of their own that are more fulfilling and pleasurable than observing someone else having the fun they could be having themselves.

Children spontaneously enjoy flow. Watch a child absorbed in creative play, often alone, and you will see it. There is a total absorption in the task at hand and a sense of delight and pleasure that is intrinsic in the activity itself, even if what is created is destroyed just moments later. The same activities may be repeated over and over, simply for the pure joy of the experience. Yet with few adults to serve as role models and little encouragement to become interested in challenges for their own sake, many children gradually lose their ability to find flow in everything they do (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991). Children give up curiosity, interest, the desire to explore new possibilities, and become accustomed to passive entertainment. Learning becomes a drudgery to be endured and they turn to automated toys with bells and whistles to provide a short-lived pleasure that they used to be able to generate for themselves over and over again whenever they had a free moment. All too soon they become bored because "there's nothing

to do." What a heavy price we pay as we sacrifice our creativity to grow into "adults."

Julia Cameron, in her excellent creativity books *The Artist's Way* (1992) and *The Vein of Gold* (1996), offers multiple activities to help adults remove the blocks to their creativity and allow themselves once again to experience the joy of creation that was once so familiar to us as children. In both books, she urges the *practice* of creative activities in order to heal the wounds inflicted to our creativity as we grew from children into adults and to recover our creative self — our "vein of gold." It is not sufficient to read about and intellectually understand the need for creative process in our lives; it *must* be practiced — and practiced regularly.

Fortunately, Cameron offers a wide array of activities to help us get started. I have listed just a few of the activities she suggests to provide a brief glimpse into a world that uses *creative play* to help us meet the needs that we have ignored as adults — unmet needs which manifest themselves in disease, depression, disgust, and destruction to ourselves and those around us. Creative play offers each of us the opportunity to heal and live happier, healthier, and yes, more productive lives. Come play with us!!

1. Make a weekly "artist's date" with yourself. This is to be done alone. Do something that is fun for you — something you haven't allowed yourself to indulge in, something you would find pleasure in experiencing.

2. Think of five imaginary lives you would like to live. Select one and *do* something you would be doing if you were living that life. Dress the part!

3. List five silly things you would like to do once. Try at least one of them.

4. Carry a loaded camera every day for a week.

5. Buy a drum and experiment with drumming and drumming music.

6. Make a collage of your hopes, dreams, and desires. Post it where you can see it every day.

7. Make a valentine to yourself, including things that support and honor what is most lovable to you and in you.

8. Spend one evening in silence, either with others or alone. Choose not to speak, read, watch TV, or write. Just listen.

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